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ABSTRACT

Superintendent turnover in California's more than 1,000 school districts is at crisis proportions, averaging 16.18 percent per year over the past 6 years. Those who once aspired to the superintendency are opting for the security of a teaching or midlevel administrative position. These facts were confirmed by analyzing a database comprising the names of all superintendents in all districts listed in the "Directory of California Public School Districts" during 1974-89. Data were also gathered from a survey of all women superintendents and all 1988-89 first-year superintendents, for a 71 percent response rate. Data were analyzed by school district organization, enrollment size, and other categories. In a 6-year period, an average of 97.09 percent of superintendents left and/or exchanged their positions at least once. Unified districts experienced the greatest turnover, averaging 16.79 percent for the period. Secondary grades 7-12 districts were served by superintendents winning the longevity award for averaging 11.67 percent annual turnover. Fewer than 21 percent of vacating superintendents appear in the directory as superintendents over the next 2 years. Eighty-seven percent of the female superintendents enter the position without previous experience as superintendents; 75 percent of superintendent vacancies occur concurrently with disharmonious board/superintendent relations. Further conclusions and recommendations are outlined. (12 references) (MLH)

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SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER: CRISIS FACING CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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CHULA VISTA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Turnover among superintendents in California's more than one thousand school districts is at crisis proportions. This phenomenon is much greater than Montgomery[10] reported. Turnover, defined as a superintendent seat vacancy for whatever reason or reasons, has averaged 16.18% per year over the past six years. The problem permeates elementary, secondary and unified districts. It affects districts regardless of enrollment size, from those with 250 or fewer students to those with more than 25,000 students. It afflicts districts in northern, central and southern sections of the state. It is acute at a time when there is the perception that the pool of well-qualified candidates is evaporating. Those who once aspired to the superintendency, according to Hess[7] and Zakariya[12], are saying things like, "No. Thanks. The compensation and other rewards are not good enough. The hours are too long and frustrating. The perils are too great! I prefer the security of a teaching or other mid-level administrative position."

Those are strong statements. Yes, and confirmed with facts taken from annual editions of the DIRECTORY OF CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS.[5] We entered into our computer the names of all superintendents and all districts listed in each of the mentioned directories for the years 1974 through 1989. One thousand and two districts existed continuously during the period. Data on districts discontinuing due to unification were deleted for all years in the study. Turnover sometimes occurs more

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than once within a year. (At least one California district recently had four superintendents within a one-year span.) Therefore, the turnover rate we report considerably understates the magnitude of this crisis rapidly impinging on the quality of leadership in California's public school districts.

"Eternal verities," affirmed by Hess[7] and Hornung[9], assert that superintendents change positions for one of four reasons; namely: (1) to assume a superintendency in a larger district with greater responsibility and a higher income; (2) to assume a superintendency in another district for one or the other of these reasons; (3) to enter willfully and blissfully into retirement to relax, collect stamps and/or to write one's memoirs; or (4) to escape from an impossible board/superintendent relationship. We addressed these "eternal verities" in a report appearing in the California School Boards Journal, Winter 1990, issue. Only one of the four withstood scrutiny of 164 responses to a survey of 246 successor superintendents. That one: California superintendents vacate their positions to escape from an intolerable board/superintendent relationship. (May be read as non-renewal of contract, buyout of remainder of salary due under contract, negotiated settlement on salary balance due under contract, dismissal from contract for cause, acceptance of announcement of future retirement, reassignment to another position in the district.)

Review of the Literature

CSBA's Richard Montgomery[10] surveyed 750 superintendents in 1987-88. He reports average tenure for superintendents in his survey as just over five years. Hornung[9] reports that superintendents, as a group, fully expect to move several times during their careers. Hess[8] reported in 1988 that seventy-five percent of all U. S. superintendents will be eligible to retire by 1994; half of all principals too. The principalship has long been considered a first step toward the superintendency.

Turnover from retirement alone could present a crisis soon.

Historical looks at this issue have been reprise items by the editors of The American School Board Journal at least four times since 1985. Two of the four items addressed the issue of superintendent turnover as one of migration from smaller, rural districts to larger, suburban or large city districts. A review of the issue as seen in 1931[4] found instability in the office of superintendent to have a deterrent effect on district progress. However, the editors noted that leaving one superintendency for promotions, better compensation and wider opportunities was in harmony with the American spirit. In 1935 the editors noted[3] average length of superintendent tenure had been three years. Local conditions and attitudes of board members, as well as personal ambitions, contributed to turnover. Superintendents were put on notice that their job security depended upon their keeping abreast of educational issues. The other two backward looks[1,2] took the perspective that the superintendent was an endangered species. People were leaving the position to follow "strange gods." Drastic measures were called for to stem the losses from superintendents leaving the profession.

Data Gathering Process

We gathered our data from two primary sources. One, we copied California Public School Directory's information into our computer. Two, we surveyed all women superintendents and all 1988-89 first-year superintendents. Our surveys received a 71% response rate.

We copied all superintendent and district names, enrollments, and organization types from several issues of California Public School Directory. We compared superintendent and district names for the years 1974, 1979 and 1984-89. We used the enrollment recorded in the 1989 directory for assigning enrollment categories. We deleted the names of all districts and their superintendents not in continuous operation all those years. A few districts, unified or otherwise, merged each year. Some

changes failed to be recorded in the directories due to untimely reporting. Some districts may have more than one superintendent change between issues. One California district is singular, distinguishing itself by having six different superintendent names listed for the 1984-89 editions. Turnover rates we report are much more apt to be under- than over-stated.

Data were analyzed in several categories. School district organization types by number included: K-6 elementary, 65 districts; K-8 elementary, 554 districts; 7-12 secondary, ten districts; 9-12 secondary, 89 districts; and K-12 unified, 284 districts. Enrollment categories by number included: 0-249 students, 227 districts; 250-999 students, 255 districts; 1,000-2,499 students, 187 districts; 2,500-4,999 students, 116 districts; 5,000-9,999 students, 107 districts; 10,000-24,999 students, 90 districts; and 25,000 students or more, 20 districts. Adult education students were not counted for any districts. One thousand and two districts operated without interruption during the years 1974-89. Districts with common administrations during the entire time were counted as single districts, being served by one person as superintendent each year of the survey.

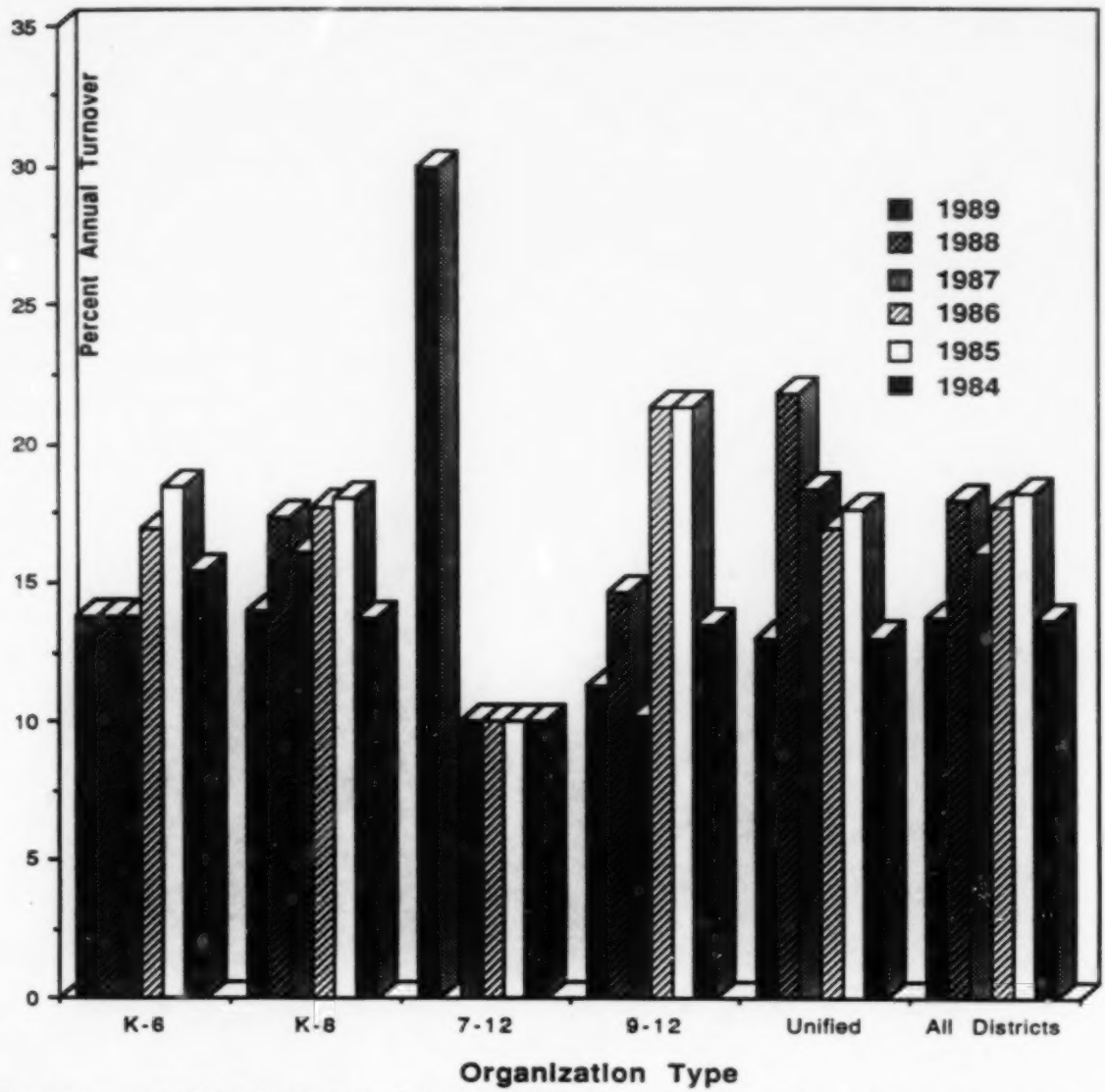
The Real Rate of Superintendent Turnover in California!

Turnover in California's K-12 districts averaged 16.18 percent for the six consecutive years, 1984-1989. Changes by year and organization type are shown in Bar Graph 1. For one reason or another, in a six-year period, an average of 97.09 percent of the persons serving as superintendents left and/or exchanged their positions at least once. Thus, superintendent tenure in California averages just over six years. A pie chart appearing later in this report will show how misleading that six-year average can be.

Unified districts, 284 in number, were winners of the greatest turnover award, averaging 16.79 percent for the period. Secondary districts serving students in grades 7-12, ten in number, were served by superintendents winning the longevity award,

averaging just 11.67 percent annual turnover. However, on a single-year turnover basis, this group of ten had a 30 percent turnover reported in the 1989 directory

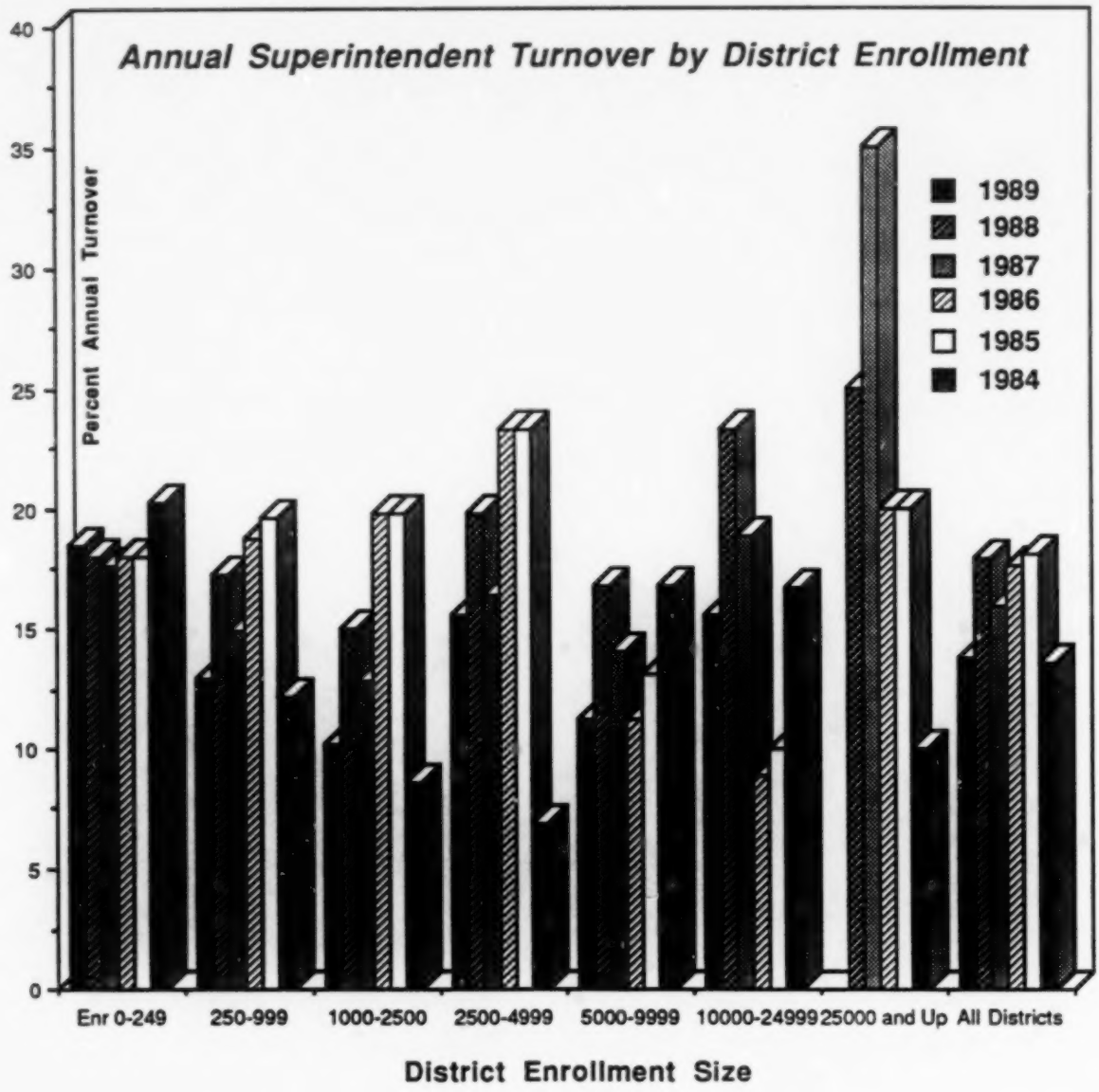
Bar Graph 1: Annual Superintendent Turnover by District Organization Type



Source — California Public School Directory, 1984-89. One thousand and two districts are represented by: 65, K-6; 554, K-8; ten, 7-12; 89, 9-12; and 284, K-12 unified.

edition. Although not shown on Bar Graph 1, the 69 community college chief administrators experienced the greatest turnover of all with an average of 17.39 percent.

Also not shown, county superintendents, represented by five appointed and 53 elected persons, experienced only a 9.2 percent annual turnover rate during this period. Our data gathering process differed from that used by CSBA's Richard Montgomery, but



Bar Graph 2: Source — California Public School Directory, 1984-89.

our data indicate that 1985 was the single year of greatest turnover, with 18.16 percent of the names listed for 1985 different from those listed for 1984. Analysis by enrollment category revealed that the 20 superintendents in districts with enrollments greater than 25,000 experienced the highest turnover rate. This, and other enrollment category data, are shown in Bar Graph 2. Lowest turnover, as a group, was experienced by the 107 superintendents in districts with enrollments between 5,000 and 9,999. Though lowest for the period, even this group experienced a 16.82 percent rate in two different years of the study.

A third way of examining this phenomenon may reveal the most interesting information of all. Turnover among the 1002 districts by numbers of different persons filling superintendent positions in all of California's districts over the past six directories is shown in Pie Chart 1. Only 38.4 percent, or 384 of California's 1,002 K-12 districts, retained the same person as superintendent for the years 1984 through 1989. Another 34.73 percent, or 348 districts, had only two persons serve; 19.96 percent, or 200 districts, had three persons serve; 5.79 percent, or 58 districts, had four persons serve; 1.1 percent, or 11 districts, had five persons serve. A single district had a different superintendent name listed in each edition of the directory from 1984-89.

Comparing the names of districts and superintendents shown in the 1989 directory with those of 1979 and 1974 revealed some other interesting information. Only twenty percent of California's superintendents have been in their current positions ten years or more. That percentage changes to eighteen at eleven years and falls to a mere six at fifteen years in the same district. We did not look back beyond 1974 as that was simply the latest year's directory in our library. Interestingly, 25 percent of the superintendents in this state maintain their positions two years or less.

If one combined the years of experience of the 18 percent of all superintendents with more than 11, the aggregate would total more experience in current positions for them than for all the others combined. That is why use of the six-plus year average tenure

for all superintendents in the state is misleading. Less than 21 percent of the persons who vacate their superintendent seats appear listed in the directory as superintendents over the next two years.

Data analysis for the seventy-one percent of 174 new superintendents and women superintendents who responded to our survey allows us to make several statements. Sixty-two percent of the persons appointed to new superintendency positions in 1988-89 entered those positions without previous superintendent experience. Eighty-seven percent of California's women superintendents reported no previous superintendency experience prior to appointment to their current positions. Seventy-five percent of the vacancies in superintendent seats occur concurrently with disharmonious relations between one or more board members and the superintendent.

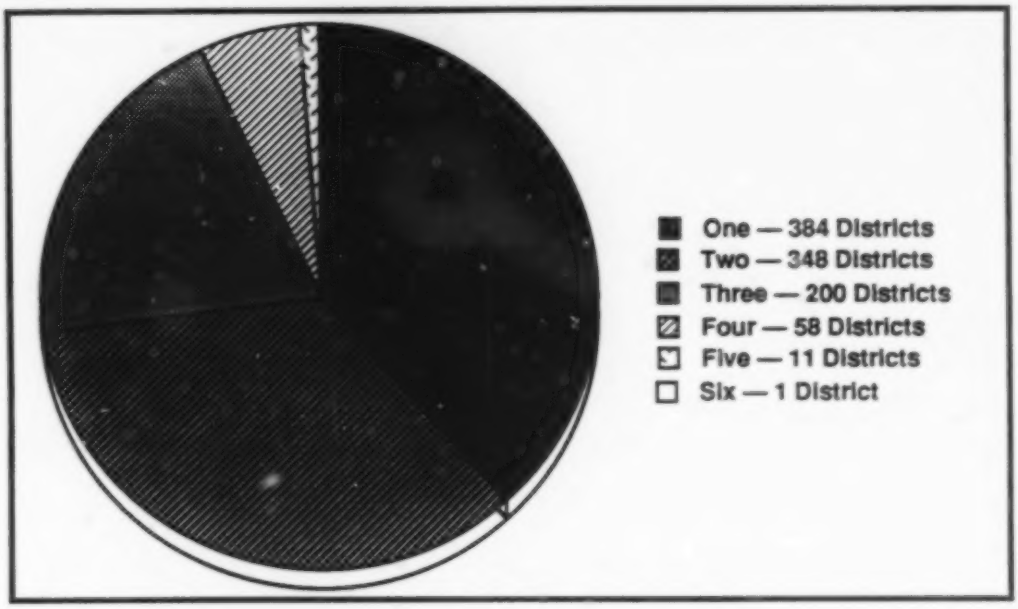
We believe that California faces a crisis in finding and retaining persons competent to fill California's superintendency slots. This crisis results from massive numbers of superintendents leaving the profession for reasons including, but not absolutely limited to, retirement. The percent of superintendents changing positions for greater responsibility and compensation is much less than is imagined. More than three in five superintendents accepting superintendencies in California are first-timers—not move-ups to larger districts, higher salaries and greater responsibilities. Moreover, a significant proportion of experienced superintendents bring their previous experience from other states.

Our findings are consistent with those reported for North Carolina and Indiana.[11] Of 35 superintendents vacating seats in 1988-89, only seven, or 20 percent, moved to other North Carolina superintendencies. Over 17 percent of Indiana's superintendents vacated their seats last year.

Summary

We previously reported that just over 20 percent of the superintendents who leave one post appear in California superintendencies within the next two years. California

Pie Chart 1: Number of Superintendents Serving Districts Over Six-Year Period



Source — California Public School Directory, 1984 - 89.

384 districts had only one person serve as superintendent over the last six years; 348 had two; 200 had three; 58 had four; 11 had five; 1 had six.

needs new superintendents at a time when its administrative numbers have not recovered from Proposition 13 cutbacks as well as those imposed by declining enrollment of the seventies and early eighties. Recruiters are reporting applicant pools decreasing in size. Job listings frequently announce extensions of the filing period for lack of qualified applicants.

A recent superintendent symposium dinner conversation among seven superintendents and two spouses was interrupted by one who exclaimed, "Listen, if this job is so great—why can each one of us immediately tell how many years and how many board meetings we have between now and retirement!" The group concluded that the expectations slapped on superintendents sap the fun from the position while heaping

on stress. These high demands are pushing one or more of that small group to consider other professional options.

Conclusions

1. California experiences an annual superintendent turnover problem greater than previously reported.
2. California faces a crisis in finding and retaining trained, able persons to serve as school district superintendents.
3. All interested groups must get together to make strategic plans for resolving this crisis.
4. Interested groups include universities, the State Department of Education, school board associations, administrator and business groups.
5. Ways to reduce disharmony between boards and superintendents must be identified.
6. Administrator training programs must incorporate internship experiences in developing interpersonal skills that will help to build productive relationships with school board members, members of the public, and representatives of the media.

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